

TOWN OF WEST HARTFORD - PUBLIC HEARING
FISCAL YEAR BUDGET 2014-2015
APRIL 8, 2014

President Slifka: Okay. We're gonna call the Public Hearing. This is a hearing on the Town of West Hartford annual budget 2014-2015. And could we have a roll call, please, Ms. Labrot?

Present were: Chris Barnes, Harry Captain, Leon Davidoff, Denise Hall, Clare Kindall, and Scott Slifka. Burke Doar, Shari Cantor and Judy Casperson were absent.

President Slifka: Okay. We will be taking testimony and the speaker will have three minutes to speak if you aware of the signup sheet. Begin with Linda DiNapoli. If I could ask everybody to please state your name and address for the record when you come to the mic. Thanks.

Okay, Mr. Milne, go ahead.

Robert Milne: Robert Milne, 3 Osage Road. And again, put before you, we have a handful of people here which obviously don't reflect the majority of the people in this town or the population of over 67,000 people – 67,000 people and this is what you get. The most striking thing about this whole budgetary process is, again, it's a draconian process – old methodology, antiquated, beyond the times with accounting standards that are obviously not speaking to more contemporary ways of presenting financial information and accountability to the public. The grand list rose 0.59%. When you sort of strip away the deferral mechanisms that you use, this sort of arbitrary process of assessing real estate after COs are issued and the intentional delay of assessing with regard to giving favoritism, I would submit to you that the hard and fast number is that there is absolutely no growth in the town as far as real estate is concerned. Any acclimations or any promoting of the increase in vehicles is a transitory issue and one of the toughest ways to collect tax as you know with collecting and suspending taxes in excess of five million dollars which is removed from the accounting system but it's still collected through the reserves. The most intriguing is an article in the West Hartford Press of which you people do sancture. The article written in the West Hartford Press talks about the smallest grand list and lists the top ten taxpayers. The top ten, if you add it, come up to 284 million dollars of tax paid by the top ten. Your budget requests a little more than 252. That's 32 million dollars more than the budget. Now think of it in the context of what's lopping off the accounting system, the suspension of taxes, and that gets us five million. Now we found another 32 million dollars of something. I would submit to that there's obviously some gross disparity in the presentation of this budget because again, you would have sanctioned this, you would have known, you would have read it. I'm asking you folks to tell me where the 32 million dollars is and how it is that you continue to go through a budgetary process with an absolute disregard to the revenue cycle. Your accounting system, which is a modified accrual system, allows you to recognize anticipated expenses, not when they're contractually obligated. They allow you to just arbitrarily pushed up into certain years, giving you the maximum ability to control and to serve what your needs are, not the needs of the public. The revenue system is always being deferred, to assessments. We've proven that to you time and time again. It gives you the greatest opportunity to control

what it is that you want the public to know and to take advantage of these people. The entire system is financed off the back of the public, the taxpayers. All the real estate, all the property is down to the collateralization of this budget. And you pay no regard. And this is the striking part...

President Slifka: Mr. Milne, thank you. Your time's expired.

Robert Milne: Because out of 67,000 people, this is what you get.

President Slifka: Okay, returning to the signup sheet, Ms. DiNapoli, we called you and passed over you. So if you'd like to go now, that's fine.

Linda DiNapoli: Create a show of unreasonableness, Mr. Mayor. The town reported taking in revenue in excess of the proposed budget, then why are we still being asked for a tax increase? In my opinion, it's because of money mismanagement on the part of the town, the councilors, and its employees. Isn't that like giving the town a 20-dollar bill for a 5-dollar charge and getting no change? That's what it looks like to me. This town has five million in uncollected revenue that's on the books; five million in uncollected revenue suspended which means booked but deferred. Just like the eight million dollars deferred in property taxes that we were supposed to receive on Blue Black Square and did not. Corporate council's office does nothing to assist the tax collector in obtaining outstanding monies due this town, yet you're asking us all to pay more. Sorry, that doesn't add up. The unfunded pension balance that will take, in the mayor's own words, 20 years to fund will, in my opinion, be funded through increased real estate taxes for 20 years going forward. Will you be in a position to pay your entire Social Security check or savings on a monthly basis for West Hartford taxes? Most likely, that is why many of our highly-paid employees do not even live in West Hartford. I call that take the gain but do not feel the pain. Run with the dough but do not help us grow. If you request reductions in the valid expenditures in the school budget, then you can watch our home values decrease. I guarantee that. I'm willing to pay my fair share forward by educating the next generation. Are you? For those of you who have had children go through the schools and succeed, you owe it to the next generation to preserve necessary school spending forward. Much of the waste is on the town side. Credit cards, five-thousand dollar department head discretionary accounts. Cell phones and payments for medical deductibles are redacted whenever requested the information. It's all gonna be coming from yours truly and the other taxpayers. The average town employee makes over 120,000 of which 54 is for benefits. How would you like to retire with six figures in accumulated sick time, vacation time, and birthday time? It's absurd. The recent reduction in one contract was hardly a drop in the bucket. They made some progress with the firefighters' pension and the health contract but not nearly enough to deal with the long-term debt. Even a 3.9% increase, that is far more than the 1.5% increase in Social Security or CPI. Our town budget seems to be running at two to three times the rate of inflation and CPI and certainly far faster than incomes are growing in the general population. That simply cannot continue to go on over the long term. The ratio between taxes and incomes keeps closing and that is not a good thing for the future of the town. Don't worry about the tickets you'll receive. The West Hartford

Police Department, under the tutelage of Police Chief Gove and Assistant Chief McCue, who, along with his wife, have town credit cards, do nothing about collecting the massive amount of tickets they write. They were just on Troutbrook when I was coming here. Why?

President Slifka: Thank you, Ms. DiNapoli your time has expired.

Linda DiNapoli: The last time I received information, through an FOI, on that for a short period of time...

President Slifka: Ms. DiNapoli, your time has expired. You have far exceeded your time. I'm gonna ask you one more time or I'm gonna have to clear the room.

(Recess for ten minutes)

Meeting Resumed

President Slifka: Okay, we're going to reconvene the hearing. We had to take a break to await security unfortunately. For those that are not familiar with this process, all we ask is for residents to attend to display decorum and when that doesn't happen, we unfortunately have to – have to bring the hearing to a stop. So hopefully that will not happen anymore and we will return to the list now. And the next speaker on the list is Bruce Grower. No, you may. You certainly may. Well, you're next on the list so at the end, I will ask if anybody didn't sign up and we'll make sure everybody's covered. So she can do it at that time but Mr. Grower, you're next on the list.

[inaudible from audience]

President Slifka: Oh, and if you could hit the button at the bottom of the mic so we can hear you.

Bruce Grower: Okay, I just have some quick questions as far as trying to save money.

President Slifka: Oh, and sir, if I could just ask you to state your name and address for the record.

Bruce Grower: Okay. My name is Bruce Grower, 217 South Highland Street. Okay. And the questions are as far as saving money, since a lot of the roads are full of potholes and they're tar – that if the town just spent money on making the roads cement, that way you wouldn't have potholes and that way you wouldn't have to spend a lot of money every year repaving all the asphalt. And at the same time, how come the town spends so much money making these islands in certain streets where it's more difficult for the plows to plow? And at the same time, basically putting these little like brick walks where a lot of them ended up getting destroyed or damaged during the wintertime and you have to keep on spending money to repair it – when if you didn't do that in the first place, then basically it would just be all one road, easier to plow. And at the

same time, it does seem like that the pensions with 11.2% increase in one year is way, way above inflation. It seems like the town is just spending way too much money on fringe benefits and really does need to cut costs a lot more. And can't you just tax the businesses more? Like in Blue Black Square and get them to pay more of the revenue.

President Slifka: Thank you, Mr. Grower. I – just so you understand the process here, what we do here is we take testimony from residents. We will – we can get you answers to your questions but we'll have to do that offline. Okay. The next speaker is Mary Nagy.

Mary Nagy: Good afternoon. Dear Mayor Slifka and distinguished council members: My name is Mary T. Nagy. That is spelled N-A-G-Y. I reside at 43 Acadia Street in West Hartford, Connecticut 06119-2303. I am a private homeowner. I am a taxpayer in this location for 20 years. I was previously a resident of West Hartford at 549 Prospect Avenue, Flat #2 Rear, for nine years. My parents were raised in West Hartford and that is on both sides. My grandparents emigrated from their respective countries of origin and they were homeowner residents in West Hartford, preceding my parents. I come before you today to voice public comment and opposition – although I'm not sure about the choice of that word, opposition but I will use it – to the budget. And to voice that there was zero public comment on an advertisement posted under the legal notices in the West Hartford News, February 20th issue, which relates to the budget. The notice interests me. I am a daily consumer of public facilities. At the time of the public meeting, which was March 3rd, regarding this notice, I cannot say that I properly understood the legal notice or was able to attend the meeting to ask further questions. So that on the deadline of the public comment period, which was March 24, 2014, I voiced and wrote an objection to the proposed use of federal housing and urban development funds intended for moderate and low income West Hartford private residents. And you have a copy of that. It was stated to me and according to the legal notice that these funds were already reallocated for a community block development grant proposal and that is written in the February 20th notice. This objection that I stand before you to voice today is both to the Town of West Hartford and to the HUD representatives and has been made through email communications. While I am not – in discussing this proposal with a number of other homeowners and persons, I am writing and standing before you to request that you uphold my objections. You can see the attachments. And that I additionally request, for the said persons for whom these federal monies were intended, that a republication of the proposal be made and an extension of the period for public comment. I have very much more information that might – I do not have time. But if you have questions for me, I would answer them. And thank you.

President Slifka: Thank you, Ms. Nagy. We do have – several of us have a copy of your letter so...

Mary Nagy: It really doesn't comment on the grounds for the objection and that is why this needs to be...

President Slifka: Understood.

Mary Nagy: ...reposted, re-publicized for public comment.

President Slifka: Thank you. I'm gonna have to move to the next speaker at this point. Thank you.

Mary Nagy: Thank you.

President Slifka: The next speaker is George Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy, unless you tell me otherwise, I am under the assumption you're here and your role is to represent the Taxpayers Association under which – the council rules, you will get five minutes instead of the three.

George Kennedy: We gotta stop meeting like this. What do I – oh, I guess it's already going. Good afternoon. My name is George Kennedy. I live at 19 Waterside Lane. I've resided in this town since 1951 so I guess that's a bit more than most of you have grown up at this point. I'm here to ask that you reduce this budget overall to the percentage increase that the surrounding towns appear to be proposing, which is around 2%. From my perspective, the West Hartford budget process is flawed. I've said this before and I'll say it again. Any business does not simply take a budget and then look at it and what are we going to do? What they do is they set the goals, start from the top down. They then set the caps and they enforce it. The town side of the house, I think, has more of a tendency to do this than the board of education does. Good budget management requires the council establish goals and spending caps at the very beginning of the budget process. This would be back in the fall. I don't feel comfortable it happens at all. Budgets, goals, and especially the spending caps would then be enforced. Otherwise the council, as the purse string holders, is faced with only being able to lop off a dollar amount at the end of the process which is where we are now. Reactive rather than proactive budgeting. As we all know, the major portion of the overall budget is the education budget which is proposed at nearly 5%. Unfortunately, state law prevents the council from going in and eliminating any individual budget line item. In the past, when requesting budget reductions, I and other speakers have been challenged by council members what would I reduce. That's kicking the can down the road. This is what we elect you guys for. We elect you guys to put the guidelines in the front end and to follow up on the rear end. It's a fair question and I'd be more than happy to go through it with anybody – especially you, Mr. Davidoff. You've made the comment several times to me. We elect you folks to establish those budget caps and guidelines and then control the budget process and to make prudent financial decisions. You have the purse strings. Please use them. So reduce the board of education budget. We need you, the council, to simply tell the board of education to lop off about a million-and-a-half bucks and let the board redistribute the reduction. Trust me, they will. They've always ended up with excess money. In the past, they used to spend it as fast as they could but now at least they're giving it back. If you cut the budget, they will live within it and they won't miss a beat. Thank you.

President Slifka: Thank you, Mr. Kennedy. That concludes the signup sheet. As I indicated at the beginning, we would open it up at that point to anybody who did not sign up who wishes to

speak. If you do, please come up now. Okay. Seeing none, then we will close the public hearing. Thank you.

Essie S. Labrot
Town Clerk/Council Clerk

ESL/kc